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ABSTRACT

Sixty-eight teachers and 62 school psychologists from California and Tennessee were compared on attributions of behavioral and characterological blame to individuals involved in a hypothetical case of father-daughter incest. A child-victim responded in an encouraging, passive, or resistant manner to her father's sexual advances, and Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) scores were assessed for prediction of blame. Respondents' confidence that child sexual maltreatment (CSM) occurred in the hypothetical case, their beliefs regarding its likelihood, and their probability of reporting it were assessed along with demographic characteristics, and training, education and involvement in CSM. Teachers and psychologists assigned the majority of both types of blame to the father; however, both groups also blamed the child. Professional position nor victim response affected blame attributed to the child, despite psychologists reporting higher estimates of likelihood, reporting, education, training, and CSM involvement. Traditional women blamed the victim and mother more, and likelihood and confidence predicted AWS scores. The majority of participants would report the case; however, Californians and psychologists reported higher probabilities of reporting, while Tennessee teachers reported lower probabilities of reporting. (Author)

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ABSTRACT

School Professionals' Attributions of Blame
In a Case of Child Sexual Maltreatment

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Sixty-eight teachers and 62 school psychologists from California and Tennessee were compared on attributions of behavioral and characterological blame to individuals involved in a hypothetical case (see attached) of father-daughter incest. A child-victim responded in an encouraging, passive, or resistant manner to her father's sexual advances, and Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) scores were assessed for prediction of blame. Respondents' confidence that child sexual maltreatment (CSM) occurred in the hypothetical case, their beliefs regarding its likelihood, and their probability of reporting it were assessed along with demographic characteristics, and training, education and involvement in CSM. Teachers and psychologists assigned the majority of both types of blame to the father; however, both groups also blamed the child. Professional position nor victim response affected blame attributed to the child, despite psychologists reporting higher estimates of likelihood, reporting, education, training, and CSM involvement. Traditional women blamed the victim and mother more, and likelihood and confidence predicted AWS scores. The majority of participants would report the case; however, Californians and psychologists reported higher probabilities of reporting, while Tennessee teachers reported lower probabilities of reporting.

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Hypothetical Vignette

Imagine that you are talking privately with a 10-year-old girl named M.L. because her academic performance and behavior at school have significantly deteriorated over the past month. You have spoken with M.L.'s parents and conveyed to them the events of the past month, to which they have responded with concern yet puzzlement over their daughter's changed behavior. As you express concern to M.L. during your meeting with her and begin to inquire about her recently changed behavior, she begins to cry. Upon further inquiry, M.L. continues to weep silently without responding to you. After a few minutes, she reveals the following story which is narrated in the third person:

One day while her mother went shopping, M.L. was at home alone with her father. She was sitting on the sofa watching T.V. when her father walked into the room. M.L.'s father and she began watching a game show. After a brief period, M.L.'s father turned to her and asked if they could play a game, to which she agreed. M.L.'s father then began rubbing her leg. Next, he began rubbing the rest of her body including her private parts.

[

At this point in the story, M.L. pauses. You then gently ask her what happened next.

[

She revealed that she

[

began rubbing her father's body in the same way (encouraging)
looked at her father and said nothing (passive)
pushed her father's hand away and told him to stop (resistant)

[

She indicated that her father continued to rub her body while saying to her how much fun the "game" was and how good it felt. **When you ask what happened next**, M.L. stated she

[

continued to rub her father's body (encouraging)
did nothing (passive)
tried to get away from her father but he would not let her (resistant)

[

She stated her father then asked her to lie down on the sofa and

[

as they lay down together, M.L. held her father (encouraging)
she did as she was told but lay very still (passive)
that she tried, again, to break away but her father held her tightly (resistant)

[

After a while, M.L.'s father said it was time to quit playing the game and told her not to tell her mother what had happened. **M.L. then tells you** she went to her room for the rest of the afternoon, and that when her mother returned, she did not mention anything to her about what had happened earlier that day.

Please turn to the following pages.

SUMMARY

This paper describes research which assessed school professionals' attributions of behavioral and characterological blame to individuals depicted in a hypothetical case of father-daughter incest. Attributions were examined as a function of professional position (teacher or school psychologist), the behavioral response of a 10-year-old female victim to her father-perpetrator (encouraging, passive, or resistant) presented in the vignette , and respondents' attitudes toward women. The predictive validity of respondents' attitudes toward women in attributing blame to child victims of incest, as well as father-perpetrators and mother-spouses, was also assessed. Additionally, the relationships between respondents' attitudes toward women, respondents' perceptions regarding the likelihood that a situation like the one depicted in the vignette would occur, their confidence that child sexual maltreatment (CSM) occurred in the hypothetical case, the probability of their reporting the case, and respondents' attributions of blame to the child victim, mother/spouse, and father/perpetrator, were examined. Finally, respondents' training, education, and involvement in CSM, in addition to demographic characteristics, were assessed for descriptive and comparative purposes.

RATIONALE. Teachers and school psychologists are key professionals for identifying, reporting, intervening in, and preventing CSM (Tharinger, Russian, & Robinson, 1989; Tharinger & Vevier, 1987). Thus it is important to study the respective attitudes of these professionals toward this issue. Previous studies have shown that varying a child victim's response to a perpetrator's advances has led to significant effects regarding blame attributed to a child, in addition to accurately describing the range of behaviors of sexually maltreated children (Broussard & Wagner, 1988; Johnson, Owens, Dewey, & Eisenberg, 1990). Gender-role attitudes have also significantly predicted blame attributed to female victims of rape; therefore, predictive power of this construct was explored in the current study in the context of blame attributed to sexually maltreated children, and their mother-spouses and father-perpetrators. Furthermore, various relationships between respondents' blame attributions, the behavioral responses of the victim, and respondents' perceptions of likelihood, confidence, and reporting were determined. Finally, unlike previous studies, this study examined both behavioral and characterological blame. Behavioral blame involves attributions to one's behavior, a relatively

modifiable source, whereas characterological blame involves attributions to a relatively non-modifiable source, one's character.

HYPOTHESES. **H1**: Victims who respond in an encouraging manner to their father's sexual advances were predicted to receive significantly greater amounts of behavioral and characterological blame, followed by victims depicted as passive, and then victims described as resisting. **H3**: Respondents who held more traditional views of women were predicted to blame child victims to a greater extent compared to those respondents who held less traditional views of women. **H4**: Psychologists were predicted to assign significantly less blame of both types to child victims compared to teachers, since psychologists are presumed to be more sensitive to a number of causal factors in CSM. **H5**: The majority of respondents were predicted to report the case in question since this decision is legally mandated. **H6**: Those respondents who attributed more blame to the child, had lower estimates of likelihood and confidence, and who were more traditional in their views toward women, were predicted to report the case less. **H7**: The response of the child victim was predicted to have possibly affected respondents' decision to report as well as their estimates of confidence and likelihood.

METHOD. Sixty-eight teachers and 62 school psychologists from California and Tennessee completed paper-pencil surveys at their job sites or in education classes that were required for certification. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three victim response treatment conditions described in a vignette. Each vignette's instructions asked respondents to imagine that a 10-year-old female student disclosed to them a story (the story subsequently read by respondents) which begins with the student asking her father to sit with her to watch a TV show. Subsequently, the father asks his daughter if they can play a game to which she responds positively. Eventually, the father fondles his daughter. Attitudes toward women were assessed using the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) which has acceptable reliability and validity (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973).

RESULTS. Sixteen percent of teachers and 8% of psychologists blamed the child's behavior, while 13% of teachers and 5% of psychologists blamed the child's character. Teachers and psychologists assigned the majority of both types of blame to the father. Teachers assigned more blame to the father's character and less blame was assigned, particularly by psychologists, to the father's character when the victim's response was resistant, and the most blame, when the victim acted passively. Teachers and school psychologists did not significantly differ in their blame attributed to the child, despite psychologists reporting higher estimates of training, education, and involvement in CSM, as well as likelihood and probability of reporting. Additionally, no significant effects were associated with victim response. Non-traditional women assigned less blame to the child and mother. Scores on the AWS were positively correlated with higher estimates of likelihood and confidence. Bi-dimensionality of the blame construct was supported when blame was attributed to the father but not the child and mother. The majority of participants stated they would report the case in question. However, California participants and psychologists reported higher probabilities of reporting compared to Tennessee participants and teachers, while Tennessee teachers reported lower probabilities of reporting relative to Tennessee psychologists and California teachers and psychologists. Participants with higher estimates of confidence also reported higher probabilities of reporting.

PRIMARY IMPLICATIONS: **(a)** Teachers' and school psychologists' attributions of blame to a female victim of incest were not significantly different, therefore, service delivery to this segment of the maltreated population could possibly be a collaborative, effective effort between the two professional groups; **(b)** Because teachers indicated a lower probability of reporting CSM than school psychologists in addition to having less knowledge about their state's guidelines for reporting CSM, consideration should be given to programs which further educate teachers about reporting laws; **(c)** The fact that both professional groups assigned some degree of blame to the child victim supports the need to educate school professionals about the dynamics of CSM; **(d)** The AWS appears to predict teachers' and school psychologists' blame in situations where children are violated sexually and mothers are implicated, although other factors clearly influenced participants' blame attributions.

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